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Making the Common Good Common



"The trouble is, I don't think the common good is all that common," said Miranda, a resident of the Servant Leadership House for women at Finlandia University. Two students and I were driving a truckload of broken furniture, unusable building materials, and long forgotten belongings

from the attic of the Servant Leadership House to the local landfill.¹ It was a good time for a conversation about how the Servant Leadership House women would embody the common good at Finlandia in the coming school year. We were dirty and sweaty and lamenting the fact that we would be just one customer among too many that day tossing construction and junk waste into a crushing bin. We were also overwhelmed by the idea that this was happening in thousands of places across the country, and even the world, on any given day. Even with improved methods of waste disposal where much is recycled, the three of us wondered at the recklessness of our throw-away habits that are regarded as normal. Shouldn't we be leaving the landfill in tears? Might we ever consider it deviant behavior to produce and toss so much waste? We left the landfill with an empty truck and encumbered hearts, having this deed made far too painless with a charge of only \$22.50.

The Common Good as Commonplace

Whether we're talking about actions that express care for the earth or care for each other, the common good becomes truly common when it is embedded in the ordinary details of our lives. When combined, these two words, *common* and *good*, are rich in complexity and ambiguity of meaning. What do we mean by good? Is the "good" actually shared in common? How do we measure if the "good" that is pursued is genuinely for the sake of the common? And Miranda's comment begs us to consider if the common good is something we conceive of as commonplace or if our tendency is to associate the common good with big, bold endeavors.

As Lutherans we take our primary cues for deliberation of the common good from the Lutheran notion of vocation. Vocational living is "good" because the task of vocation is to be instruments of God's healing purposes in ways that are always and only for the sake of the neighbor's well-being. In the words of Gustaf Wingren, "our only care ought to be what we should do with all the good that God has made, so that it may benefit our neighbor" (8). The "good" that benefits the neighbor through vocation is "common" because it is an all-inclusive idea of the neighbor. The neighbor who is the beneficiary of the good of vocation should not be confused with a convenient, geographical, or familiar sense of relationship. The neighbor is not defined by location but by his or her *need* for wholeness and healing.

The common good can also be regarded as necessarily commonplace in a Lutheran sense of vocation. For Luther,

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there are no actions, interactions, or occupations that are more sacred than others. Luther's vocational perspective recognizes the sacred purpose in the seemingly mundane tasks and in the totality of our everyday lives. The visible common good enacted through vocation is intended to be commonplace. This is not to deny that we are also called to exercise the common good in more difficult and unexpected ways as well. We know from listening to the voices of the prophets and the poor that a broader vision of the neighbor and a more careful listening to the neighbor and his or her need is required. We begin to see new neighbors who were previously hidden from our consciousness and experience. We encounter neighbors who are denied healing and wholeness because of unjust, systemic poverty and the scandalous deprivation of human rights. These are circumstances which can stir the heart toward a sense of call to participate in a more radical pursuit of the common good that addresses the most serious concerns of the world. But God also calls his servants to take part in the healing of the world in the everyday occurrences of our lives.

Common, Little Bits of, Good

As we strive to stimulate thinking and action for the common good on the campuses of our Lutheran colleges and universities it is helpful to acknowledge the temptation to associate the common good only with programs and opportunities that are extraordinary. Indeed, there are fantastic things being accomplished at our schools which push our students to address the needs of marginal communities through action and advocacy. But we cannot lose sight of the simpler aim of nudging our students toward an enduring awareness of the call to do their "little bit of good" in their everyday relationships and actions.²

Finlandia University's Servant Leadership House gives the women residents the opportunity to grow in their capacity to promote and contribute their little bits of good to the common good. A servant leader's persistent concern is for the growth of people and consequently the growth of a better, more sustainable society. The women of the Servant Leadership House define serving as having an enriching net effect on others; they enrich campus and

community primarily by carrying out awareness-raising campaigns for social justice concerns.

But it is really their understanding of leadership that fosters the women's sense of call to do their little bits of the common good. They understand that leadership is not simply about being in charge. After all, only a few are actually in leadership positions with this kind of authority. The servant leader is much more interested in having an influence than having a position of leadership because "at its core, servant-leadership is a long-term, transformational approach to life and work—in essence, a way of being—that has the potential for creating positive change throughout our society" (Greenleaf, *Servant Leader Within* 16). This type of leadership can be exercised by anyone.

"The little bits of the common good—executed in the routine encounters and daily habits of servant leaders—define their way of being, subtly influence others, and carry the potential for significant positive change."

The Servant Leadership House women are genuinely concerned about many of the world's ailments. But as students of servant leadership they understand that "if a flaw in the world is to be remedied, to the servant the process of change starts *in here*, in the servant, not *out there*" (Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* 44). So the women struggle to make the common good commonplace in their own lives. Examining their actions and motivations in relation to the common good, even if it is something as conventional as disposing a truckload of garbage into a landfill, is hard work, although it's not the kind of work toward the common good that usually gets attention. None the less, this cultivation of the common good as commonplace in the lives of these women rests on the assumption that the only way to address the urgent problems of our world is "one person and one action at a time because there isn't anything else to work with" (Greenleaf, *The Servant Leader Within*, 72).

Endnotes

1. The Servant Leadership House is a women's special interest housing option inaugurated in 2014. Students were somewhat involved in the renovation of the 100-year old house situated on the corner of the campus that is now a beautiful living space for six women.

2. The phrase is borrowed from a quotation by Desmond Tutu: "Do your little bit of good where you are. It's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world."

Works Cited

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◆ SAVE THE DATE ◆

The 2016 Vocation of a Lutheran College Conference

June 8-10, 2016 | Augsburg College | Minneapolis, Minnesota

◆ CONFERENCE THEME ◆

"The Vocation of a Lutheran College:
Preparing Global Leaders for a Religiously Diverse World"

◆ THE CONFERENCE WILL EXPLORE ◆

- 1 The connection between the Lutheran intellectual tradition and a commitment to interfaith understanding.
- 2 Why and how to prepare students from multiple religious and non-religious background/perspectives for leadership and service in a religiously diverse world.
- 3 Affirming/developing a vision for interfaith cooperation as a priority on ELCA college and university campuses, and considering tactics to implement this vision.

◆ PRESENTERS WILL INCLUDE ◆

Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton

Eboo Patel (Interfaith Youth Core)

Presiding Bishop Emeritus Mark Hanson

Prof. Martha Stortz (Augsburg College)

Prof. Darrell Jodock (retired, Gustavus Adolphus College)

Please note that colleges and universities are invited to include a student in their delegations this year. Because the conference will convene a month earlier than usual and because we seek student engagement, please begin now to identify participants from your school.